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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a group counseling weight loss program, Weight Group, for elementary school students who are already overweight for their age and body structure. The selection procedures for group members and the general format of the sessions are outlined, and the need for confidentiality is stressed. The rules for Weight Group members are listed and a typical format for a session, including activity descriptions and time allotments, is given. Activities suggested include charting of progress and special group recognition for successful weight losers. A series of eight stimulus activities, designed to help teach proper nutrition and alternatives to junk foods, are described. Parental involvement is suggested if the program is to succeed and if those who lose weight are to receive the necessary reinforcement to keep it off. Exhibit A is a sample letter to parents describing the program and requesting parental permission for the child's involvement. Exhibit B is a sample progress report to be sent home to parents during the course of the program. Exhibit C is a list of rules for parents of children in Weight Group, and Exhibit D is a sample check sheet for group participants to record progress. (JAC)

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WEIGHT: HELPING KIDS KEEP IT OFF!

by

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WEIGHT--HELPING KIDS KEEP IT OFF

Debbie and Barb are the first to enter the counseling room. Debbie is obviously excited. "I think I lost this week," she whispers to the counselor as she slips off her shoes and steps onto the balance scale platform. As the figures go down on a small slip of paper which is handad to the client, she jumps up and down excitedly exclaiming, "I did! I did!," comparing the figure with the one on the chart for the previous week. "I'm so glad! I'm going to pick a plant this time."

This scene has been enacted many times over in a unique kind of counseling program for elementary school children--a Weight Group for kids who are already overweight for their age and body structure. The goals of the group are to help children:

1. Hold their weight in check as they grow taller so that they become slimmer.
2. Learn some basics about nutrition and the characteristics of "good" food versus "junk" food.
3. Learn the value of regular exercise.
4. Learn methods of monitoring and charting one's weight.
5. Experience the joy of self-mastery.

SELECTION OF GROUP MEMBERS

The initial contact for Weight Group membership is undertaken in an individual contact with the counselor after school staff members have submitted the names of potential clients. No announcements are made that such a group exists and teachers are advised never to reveal reasons why a child

is in a particular counseling group, although clients are free to share with a friend their purpose in group if they choose.

As we meet together for the first time, I explain that his/her teacher and I thought there might be some interest in a certain counseling group I would be starting. I add, "But, before I tell you anymore about it, would you look at the person you see here and tell me what you think?", giving the child a hand mirror. I then suggest that s/he start at the top of the head and, moving down, express an opinion of the hair, eyes, nose, cheeks, mouth, chin, neck and body. By the time the child gets to the cheeks, where fatty tissue is so often apparent, there is usually some dissatisfaction expressed over the excess weight. At this point it is an easy matter to introduce the Weight Group and its purposes. Most children interviewed are eager to join although occasionally someone may be too shy or undisciplined to accept the challenge. Or he or she may actually be convinced that it is his/her destiny "to be huge" because of a large bone structure or other family characteristics.

After a client agrees to participate in the Weight Group, a letter is sent to the parents, a part of which is to be signed and returned. When all are collected the group can begin. Boys and girls are welcome to participate in the same group. Often membership in these groups show a preponderance of females. It is often October when my Weight Groups begin and we will then meet once weekly on the same day until school is dismissed for summer.

Format of the Sessions

In that first session each group member is shown a booklet containing his/her chart between two construction paper covers--each child's book is a different color to be easily recognizable. The children find the results

of their weigh-in and height-measure during the initial session have been recorded. They look at the chart privately, showing it to no one but the counselor, and prepare to have a new entry recorded as they remove their shoes for the weekly weigh-in. As I weigh a client, I jot down their weight on a small slip of paper which is given to the child for safe-keeping. When everyone has been weighed, I sit at the recording table calling up one child at a time to watch while the weight is entered on the line graph. Then, for my own use during recognition time, on another sheet I note who has lost, maintained or gained weight. The rest of the children play games, exercise or visit during this time.

Then we gather around on the floor for recognition. I usually summarize the week's progress, then name the child who has been most successful, e.g. "Janie lost a pound and a quarter this week. Let's clap for Janie," modeling and encouraging enthusiastic applause. "Tell us how you managed to lose weight so quickly." Then Janie becomes the star of the moment. Her eyes shine with appreciation and excitement over the group support. Early in the year she may not know how she managed to succeed. Later on she begins to connect cause and effect of her eating habits by stating, "I gave my Halloween candy to my Dad" or "I played outside for an hour every day." Then Janie is shown the current supply of reinforcers and is given ample time to make her selection. When this is completed, the next most successful client has a turn and so on until the group enjoys lunch together. Of course, people who gained weight are not embarrassed by recognition and in a group of ten or twelve clients it is easy not to be noticed.

All the sessions contain this general format with the addition of stimulus activities. In the first session the rules are outlined and in subsequent sessions are reviewed.

Rules for Weight Group Members

1. Never ask any group member what they weight or whether they've gained.
2. Enthusiastically encourage another member's success.
3. Keep your eyes off the scale except when you are on it.
4. Look away when someone is looking at their chart.
5. Stay with the group at least 6 weeks before asking to quit.

Format Of The Typical Session

Time	Activity
2 min. per child	1. Children remove their shoes and heavy metal accessories.
2 min. per child 2 min. per child	2. Counselor weighs clients and jots the figure on a small slip of paper. (Once each month height is measured & recorded on the same paper.)
	Charting
1 min. per child	3. Each child is called to the recording table. The figures are transferred to the chart and the connecting lines are drawn. This can be done by the children when they understand the concept.
	4. The children uninvolved in recording activities occupy themselves with play.
3 min.	5. The counselor makes a list of successful clients in order to be recognized.
	Recognition
	6. The counselor asks the children to gather around in a central place for recognition.
1 min. per client	7. The counselor announces one successful client in the order of greatest weight loss. The other children are encouraged to applaud and cheer.
2 min. per child	8. The "star" of the moment is asked to share the secrets of success and is allowed time to bask in the limelight.
1 min. per client	9. The "star" is shown a display of non-edible reinforcers and is allowed to choose a reward.
	10. Stimulus Activity

11. The counselor completes the progress report sheets for parents.

12. Lunch.

Stimulus Activity #1
Taste Treat

Purpose: To introduce low calorie foods which the children might enjoy enough to substitute for higher calorie foods in their daily diet.

Supplies:
Dried Apples
Pricky Pear
Avocado
Cottage Cheese
Yogurt
Bean Sprouts
Low-cal Italian Dressing
Greek Pocket Bread

Method: The foods can be cut into bite-sized portions & placed on paper plates. The plates can be passed around the table so that each person can choose to try a food or pass it by voluntarily. This taste treat is used in conjunction with the child's regular lunch.

Stimulus Activity #2
The Four Food Groups Chart

Purpose: To teach the need for a diet balanced in the four basic food groups: the milk group, the protien group, the grain group and the fruit and vegetable group.

Supplies: A large display chart showing the four food groups and listing the daily required amounts. Smaller charts offering duplicate information as take-home material.
1 sheet plain paper for each child. Pencils.

Method: Ask the children to list all the foods they ate the previous day. Then assign a food group number to each serving. Total the servings in each group. Check the chart to compare whether appropriate nutritional balance was achieved. Encourage repeating this process at home.

Stimulus Activity #3
Filmstrip "The Snacking Mouse"

Purpose: To teach the deleterious effect of snacking on inappropriate foods and to teach which foods are appropriate for in-between meal snacks.

Materials: The Snacking Mouse - See Resource List

Method: Introduce this cartoon film by saying the children should be able to name two foods they should avoid in snacking and two foods they could eat between meals. View the film. Discuss.

Stimulus Activity #4
Paper Mache Foods

Purpose: To provide an enjoyable way of exploring the qualities in foods which make them desirable of undesirable in the view of those on a weight-control program.
Note: This project will require 4-6 sessions to complete.

Materials: Paper strips. Paste for paper mache. Paints. String. Calorie charts.

Method: Discuss the making of paper mache objects. Challenge the children to choose the food he or she would like to create in art form. After the choices are made, help the children categorize them into "junk food" or "good food" by studying caloric & nutritional content. Make the foods, dry, paint, dry and hang by category in the group counseling room.

Stimulus Activity #5
Creative Movement with Video Tape

Purpose: To give the children an opportunity to see themselves performing on a television screen. Also, in taking on certain roles, to feel a sense of weightlessness or airiness.

Materials: Video camera, a video tape & tape deck and monitor stationed in a large, open room. List of impetus statements.

1. A creaking door.
2. Moist fog creeping over the city.
3. Tumbling leaves.
4. Crashing waves.
5. A hungry, circling gull.
6. A fluffy snowflake.
7. A tiny spider spinning a delicate web.

Method: Explain the careful use of video equipment. Turn on the camera and allow the children to view themselves standing still & waving. Then suggest that they act out a creaking door with body movements. Give adequate time, then move on to the next impetus statement and so on. Afterward, review the tape. Listen to the various ways children evaluate their image.

Stimulus Activity #6
Food Workbook Exercise

Purpose: To give the children experience in planning well-balanced lunches.

Materials: Activity Masters number 5 and 6 from McDonald's Nutrition Action Pack. Scissors, paste.

Method: Inform children that they will be arranging nutritional lunches by cutting out food pictures and pasting them in the order they choose. They should have four balanced lunches with foods from the basic four food groups in each menu.

Stimulus Activity #7
Pulse Measurement

Purpose: To teach a method of determining whether a given quantity of an exercise is adequate for consuming body fat.

Material: Clock with sweeping second hand.

Method: Instruct the children to place their fingers against their neck until they find their pulse and can count the beats. At a signal everyone should count their own heartbeat for 30 seconds. Then they multiply that figure by 2. Record. Engage in vigorous exercise for 20 minutes. Count the pulse again for 30 seconds and multiply by 2. If the post-exercise figure is greater than the initial count, it can be assumed that the exercise is vigorous enough to burn body fat.

Stimulus Activity #8
Choice Test

Purpose: To provide an opportunity for the children to choose from several pairs of foods, those foods which are lower in calories.

Materials: List of food pairs for each participant. Pencils.

1.	Fresh pear	Potato Chips
2.	8 oz. skim milk	A chocolate shake
3.	1 apple	1 piece of pie
4.	Snack of celery	Snack of salted peanuts
5.	A candy bar	One orange
6.	4 oz. green beans	4 oz. potatoes & gravy
7.	1 piece of fried chicken	1 piece of broiled chicken
8.	2 raw carrots	2 peanut butter cookies
9.	1 dish of yogurt	1 dish of ice cream
10.	Cottage cheese	Chocolate pudding
11.	Dried apples	Buttered popcorn

Method: Tell the children they are to select the best food for dieters from each 2 foods in a row. Draw a circle around the name of the food selected. When everyone has finished the exercise, discuss the choices made.

Parental Involvement

It is wise to engage in frequent communication with the parents or guardians of weight group clients. Begin with a letter to secure parental support for the child's participation (Sample Exhibit A). Each week thereafter, send home a progress message with the children (Exhibit B) including a notation of any rewards earned. Other aides such as the four food groups chart and maintenance check sheets or paper/pencil tasks can be taken home by the children from time to time. The counselor can be available for parent conferences or by telephone for parents with concerns or questions.

CONCLUSION:

Over my seven years experience I have found Weight Groups to be rewarding to me as well as productive for the children involved. However, the counselor initiating such a guidance program should be aware of the pitfalls. Overweight children often have at least one overweight parent. Therefore, the counselor is in a position of having to elicit the parents cooperation as well as educating them into adopting healthier practices in the family. The counselor support throughout the school year can produce tremendous success, all of which can be decimated by one careless summer of non-support within the family. Parents need to learn how to set realistic weight goals for their children, also.

The reinforcement of success with extrinsic rewards (please--no food!) provided according to refined behavior modification principles is essential. The clients should neither be rewarded for not having expended effort nor denied rewards when they have experienced success--no matter how minute. The more potent rewards (things which kids view as more desirable) should be provided toward the outset, tapering off in value as the year progresses. By then, the joy of self-mastery provides intrinsic rewards minimizing the desire for trinkets. More than one school year may be required for such progress to take place with some children.

The counselor can enhance the Weight Group program by being an <u>active</u> participant in the weighing, charting, dieting process. The children will learn more from your sensible, honest, consistent, encouraging example than from all the preaching in the world.

An important rule to follow is to allow a one pound gain for every quarter inch growth in height. Measure height once every month, weight

every week. On the day height is measure; reward those who have grown and kept within the confines of this rule the same as others who have maintained weight at the same height.

Don't let discouragement dissolve your group, although you may need to allow a very discouraged individual to drop out. Still, keep the rest going. You'll be performing a great service for today's generation.

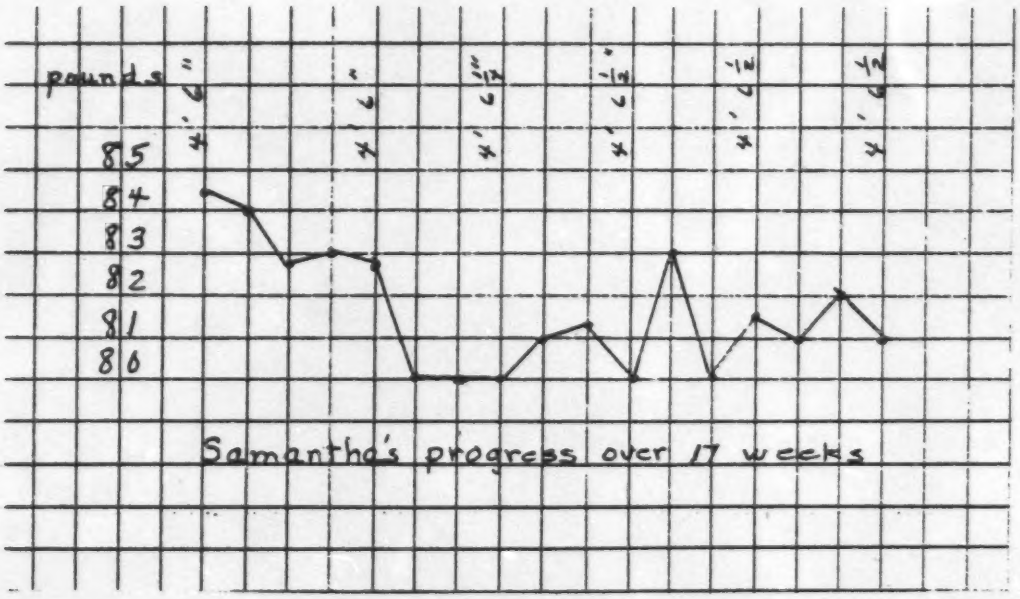


Exhibit A

Dear Parents:

Your son/daughter, _____, has talked with me in an individual interview regarding self-perceptions about physical size and would like to join a counseling group for the purpose of preventing weight gain. The group will meet once each week in the guidance area where they will weigh-in and discuss feelings about gains and losses. Incentive rewards may be used. Whenever this occurs, a note is sent to the parents letting you know what your child has chosen. We will do exercises and play the Diet Game. There will be strict confidentiality rules and cautions against teasing. The appointment slips do not make reference to the nature of the counseling sessions, and teachers are asked not to discuss these things with other children in the class.

I will not prescribe diets but will encourage the children to follow those prescribed by parents or doctors. We may discuss such things as the four basic food groups and appropriate snacks. Since diet is a matter which falls under parental control, we are asking parents and/or guardians to sign the statement below. You may wish to consult your family physician about weight loss for your child. Please be reasonable in your expectations. Many children are successful if they maintain their present weight as they grow taller. Your child will be given a report to take home every week, so be sure to look at it and praise him/her for successes.

Sincerely,

Counselor

P.S. Our session will be Tuesdays from 10:45-11:20 followed by lunch together with the counselor. The children may plan to have their usual lunch, whether hot or cold.

PLEASE DETACH AND RETURN

_____
Date

I, (parent of guardian) _____, sanction (child's name) _____ being a member of the group for weight loss at ~~Hinman~~ School. I will assume responsibility for the health of my child. Keeping in mind my child's height, an appropriate weight goal for the end of this school year would be _____ pounds.

_____
Signature

Exhibit B

To: The parent(s) or guardian of _____

From: Your child's Elementary School Counselor,_____

Date:

Since last week your child's weight has fluctuated/maintained like this:

Increased/decreased_____pounds.

Since one month ago your child's height has _____

Today your child earned a reward and chose_____

_____

I hope that this information will help you inspire your child in his or her efforts to curb weight increases. You may do this by the following methods:

Give praise for successes.

Don't nag about failures but discuss facts realistically.

Cut out snacks at TV times and other times. Three meals a day are adequate.

Make sure that your child plays outside vigorously for 1-2 hrs. DAILY!

Use a luncheon or breakfast plate rather than a dinner size plate. Fill it once.

Encourage drinking water for thirst rather than soda pop or milk.

Use skim milk at meals.

Don't delude yourselves by thinking this "baby fat" will go away. These children will need to watch their diets throughout life!

Be a good example. If you are overweight, please diet and get regular exercise (without cheating) yourself!

If your child gains weight for four weeks in succession a warning will be given. At five weeks of weight gain your child will be asked to leave the group.

Exhibit C

RULES FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN IN WEIGHT GROUP

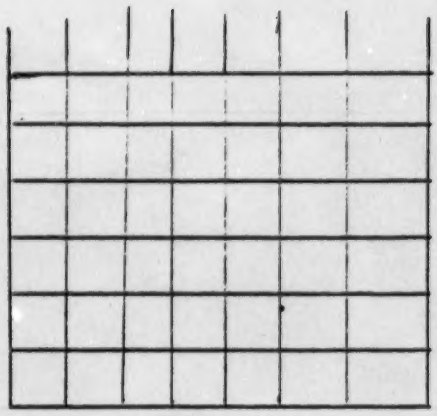
1. Eliminate the use of food as reward or punishment.
2. Make the home environment helpful for the overweight child. Remove such temptations as the sight of inviting dishes full of candy and jars of candy or bags of potato chips.
3. Ban eating in front of the TV.
4. Make dining at the table pleasant. Serve moderate individual portions. Encourage cutting food into small pieces. Eat slowly.
5. Wait 10 minutes between dinner and dessert to make dessert easier to resist.
6. Use a luncheon size plate for dinner. It fools one into thinking he/she is getting a lot of food.
7. Have the child keep a food diary and count calories with parental help.
8. Encourage the child to be more physically active, with the help of family participation.
9. Don't nag. Praise even a small loss of weight or a growth in height not accompanied by weight gain.
10. Learn to celebrate birthdays and other occasions in ways other than the typical ice cream and cake routine. For example:
    a. Offer a toast to the honoree with a tall galss of ice water.
    b. Celebrate with creative movement. Put on the music and allow people to move freely.
    c. Use group activities such as hiking, bowling, swimming, sledding, skiing, skating, jumping rope.
    d. Have fresh fruits, dried fruits, cheese for treats.
11. Support the successes with smiles and hugs.
12. Overlook the failures and keep your expectations realistic!

13.

Exhibit D

Check sheet for people in weight maintenance.

DAYS OF THE WEEK



STEPS To Follow In Eating Your Big Meal Of The Day.

1. Use a smaller plate than your usual dinner plate.
2. Serve before eating.
3. Fill your plate. Then wait 3 minutes to begin.
4. Swallow each mouthful before taking the next one.
5. Leave the table after the main course.
6. Wait 10 minutes for desserts.